

The Good Guys Get a Break July 10

Much of Britain's combat actions early in World War II took place in North Africa. Benito Mussolini, the fascist leader of Italy, sought to restore the glory of the Roman Empire and turn the Mediterranean into what ancient Rome had called "Mare Nostrum" (Our Sea). One of the great prizes Mussolini sought in North Africa was control of the Suez Canal, then under British control. When the Italian military faltered against the British, Adolph Hitler sent German units to bolster his ally. One major German unit was the now-famed Afrika Korps, under General Erwin Rommel.

For both sides, battles were waged under the most difficult logistics conditions; virtually everything the Armies needed had to be shipped from Europe, usually Italy. Due to the logistics challenges and many other factors from leadership problems to environmental conditions, the North African campaign see-sawed, with one side dominant for a time, then the other. One factor was common to both sides --- the commanding generals had access to good COMINT about their adversary.

Oberleutnant Alfred Seebohm led the 621st Radio Intercept Company, a COMINT unit that provided strategic information about the deployment of British forces and often gave Rommel valuable tactical advantage during operations. Rommel based many of his decisions on this intelligence source.

On July 10, 1942, the situation changed. The Germans had begun an offensive; the British general, Auchinleck, had anticipated it --- based on his own SIGINT sources. With intelligence that German SIGINT units were deployed near the front lines at a place called Tel el Aisa, the 9th Australian Division attacked the position. Oberleutnant Seebohm was there in one of his intercept vehicles, just 600 meters behind the front lines. Seebohm himself was killed, along with several of his men. His intercept truck was captured intact, along with dozens of his men.

In addition to documents relating to German codes, the British discovered how well the Germans had been able to exploit their (British) field communications.

They also learned the Germans were getting advance information about British operations because they had solved the code used by the American military attaché in Cairo.

Captured along with the intercept truck was Seebohm's second-in-command, Leutnant Heinrich Herz, who revealed to the British how skillful the Germans were at SIGINT work and how well they had done against British communications.

The July 10 action had important implications for future British operations. From this point on, the British made special efforts to secure their communications while continuing to exploit those of the Germans. Eventually Rommel rebuilt his COMINT organization, but by the time it became operational, the British had tightened their security practices and, as one historian of COMINT in North Africa put it, "Seebohm's successor lacked Seebohm's skill."

SOURCES:

Kenneth Macksey, *The Searchers: Radio Intercept in Two World Wars* (Cassell, 2003);

Ralph Bennett, *ULTRA and Mediterranean Strategy* (William Morrow, 1989).